

We Are All Alone in This Anyway

I'd just finished washing the dishes when the doorbell rang. I seldom had visitors, much less on a weekday evening. I wondered if it was Claire or, even better, Claire and Duncan. I hastily dried my hands on my shirt and opened the door.

A woman stood by the entrance with a small boy. On her shoulders were two bulging backpacks. She stooped a little from under their weight and gave me an embarrassed smile.

"Are you selling something? Because I'm not interested." I was about to shut the door when she stopped me.

"Shaun, wait."

I paused.

"Remember me?" She tucked a stray hair behind her ear, as though revealing her face for the first time. "Huiling? Jun Ming's sister?"

I stared at this woman, her large brown eyes distinctly spaced apart and crowned with long lashes, face open and expectant, a glimmer of her brother still in her angular features after all these years. I blinked, unable to comprehend her presence. "Huiling?" I repeated. "Why are you here?"

"Can I... may I come in?" She nudged the boy forward as if he were an afterthought. "This is my son, Ian." The boy mumbled hi and stared at his sneakers. I noticed they were old and battered, and he carried a knapsack too.

I opened the door wide and let them in. My minimalistic two-bedroom condominium was designed with Claire's aesthetic; most of the furniture was either black or grey, a striking contrast against the white walls. Each piece—from the leather sofa to the steel-mounted shelves—was carefully chosen by her. Nothing was superfluous, and everything had to be in place, much like her motto in life. She couldn't stand clutter.

Huiling and Ian took off their shoes and set their bags on the floor with a thud. Their messy heap of belongings felt like a blotch in my pristine living room. I watched Huiling wipe the

perspiration off her forehead with one hand and, for a moment, my stomach tightened as I recalled the last time I'd seen her, the memory surprisingly sharp. She was a lot younger then. Sixteen, to be exact. It was the last day of Jun Ming's funeral wake, just before the procession set off for the crematorium, and she was dressed in mourning clothes—a plain white shirt and black pants—and was guiding her mother by the arm. I rubbed my eyes as if to remove the apparition before me.

"Why are you here?" I asked again, trying to keep the irritation from my voice. I'd enough problems on my plate and was not in a generous mood to accommodate new ones.

She hesitated. "I need a place to stay."

"And you came here?" I did not bother to mask my incredulous tone. "Don't you have other friends, relatives, to stay with?" I hardly know you anymore, I wanted to add.

She gave a small laugh. "Believe me. I would if I could. Many of my friends are not able to house me."

"But how did you even find me?"

"I was speaking to Cynthia. You know, Lionel's wife? She mentioned that you might have room."

Lionel was an old friend from secondary school, and we would catch up over beer every couple of months. I didn't recall Lionel mentioning Huiling and doubted her story was true. Then, it hit me. To have suggested my place, Cynthia must have told Huiling about Claire's departure. Heat rushed to my face.

"Anyway," Huiling said, not seeming to notice my embarrassment. "I know it's a big favour to ask, but I was hoping to stay here for ten days. Tops. My house is undergoing renovation, you see, and it's been difficult for him."

I stared at Ian who was fidgeting and swaying from one leg to the other. He looked about seven years old, a little older than Duncan. "It's not really convenient..." I started, although I was already thinking that Duncan's room was perfect for Ian. Plus, there was a spare mattress on

the floor next to Duncan's bed, where Claire used to sleep.

“Don’t worry. We won’t bother you at all. You won’t even notice our presence.” She was starting to look desperate, and I felt sorry for her. There was no reason for me to help her apart from the fact that she was Jun Ming’s sister, and I’d a feeling she knew that. Why else would she appear at my doorstep all of a sudden?

“Okay, fine,” I finally said, and then added: “My wife and son are currently away. When they are back, you have to leave, okay?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. Then she cleared her throat. “I’m looking for a job so I can’t pay you anything. But I can help you with your chores if that’s what you need.”

I brushed her concerns away. I never intended for her to pay. She broke into a smile and thanked me with relief. I showed them Duncan’s room—the most colourfully decorated space in the house—and she began unpacking their clothes and toiletries while Ian fiddled with Duncan’s toys: squishing his teddy bear, pushing his toy car, flipping his story books. Watching them gave me a strange sense of *deja vu*, as if I’d entered into a different realm, a realm from the past.

Huiling insisted on making dinner even though I told her she didn’t have to.

“I don’t want to be a freeloader,” she said smiling, but I could tell she wasn’t joking. In truth, I had little in my refrigerator and pantry. Just a few potatoes, eggs, old stalks of celery and carrots, frozen peas, and canned luncheon meat, so I was surprised that she could whip up a rather delicious stew. For the first time in weeks, I had two helpings of rice. She seemed pleased with my appetite.

“You like it? I can cook again tomorrow,” she said, spooning vegetables for Ian. He hadn’t spoken all day and seemed quiet for a boy his age. Maybe he was just shy around strangers. I thought about Duncan and how his excited chatter often filled up the spaces at home, his never-ending questions and stories slicing through the thin air of silences between Claire and I, and how it was his childlike voice that I missed the most on nights when I couldn’t

sleep, when the air in the bedroom felt too stiff, and I would lie in the dark on the cool, marble floor in the living room, listening to the ceiling fan spin round and round. Waiting for dawn to break.

I cleared the empty plates from the table and brought them to the sink.

“Hey, let me do it.” Huiling jumped up and grabbed the dirty dishes from me. Up close, the faint flowery scent from her clothes reminded me of my short-lived crush on her. Back then, I used to pop by her house after school to play Nintendo with Jun Ming. She would walk around the living room in a faded PE shirt and FBT shorts, often snacking on potato chips and Japanese rice crackers while chatting on the phone. With the receiver tucked under her ear, she would lick every speck of salt and sugar from her fingertips before throwing the packet away. I was an only child in an all-boys primary school, so to be in such proximity to an older girl, and a pretty one at that, was mesmerising. Sometimes, she would join us in our games, and sitting next to her, it was that smell—that fresh, awakening scent that seemed to solely belong to the opposite gender—that struck me. The three of us would take turns at the game console, hooting and yelling at the TV while trading punches in Street Fighter, the evening sun slanting into the living room, until it was time for me to return home for dinner.

The next morning, Huiling emerged from Duncan’s room dressed in a formal button-down white blouse and a grey pencil skirt. She looked pretty with makeup, her hair fixed in a neat ponytail. Ian followed behind in his school uniform.

“Going for an interview?” I asked.

“Yup,” she replied, packing Ian’s school bag.

“At where?”

“An accounting firm.”

“Oh, you’re an accountant?”

“No.” She hesitated. “They are looking for a receptionist.”

I couldn't hide my surprise. Huiling used to be one of the top students in secondary school. She caught the look on my face.

"Well, I've to go now," she muttered before taking Ian's hand and leaving the house.

I realised there were many things about Huiling that were a mystery. I didn't know where her husband was or if she was even married. I didn't know where she lived, what job she held previously, or what she had been doing all these years. After Jun Ming's death, I didn't see her in school anymore, even though the O-level examinations were due in a few months. I wasn't sure if she even sat for them.

That night, after Huiling tucked Ian to bed, I opened two cans of beer and we sat on the floor on the balcony. We watched a couple in athletic wear walk their dog on the footpath, their tiny bodies moving steadily across the park before disappearing into the trees. She was the first to break the silence.

"I saw the look on your face."

"What look?" I said, pretending not to know.

"When I told you I was applying to be a receptionist."

"I'm sorry." And I meant it.

"It's been hard. You won't understand."

"You're right. I don't." I thought about Jun Ming and wondered what he would be if he were still alive. He used to say he wanted to be a pilot when he grew up.

"Do you still think about him?"

Her voice was small, almost childlike. I knew she was referring to Jun Ming, and I wondered if I should be honest. The first year was a little rough, but as with all other things in life, we move on eventually. And perhaps, a part of me didn't want to think about his death, so I, too, put away the memory of his living. "Not so much in the past years," I said.

"Can I ask you something?"

“Sure.”

“Why weren't you at the funeral?”

I kept silent.

“No one from his class came. He would have liked you to be there.” She paused, as if second-guessing herself. Then she said, “I know he would.”

I took a swig of my beer. I didn't know how to explain that I *did* go to the funeral. I was there. But standing outside the wake, listening to the Buddhist monks chant prayers for Jun Ming in his final journey to the netherworld, I couldn't bring myself to step in. I didn't want to speak to his parents. I didn't want to see his portrait, his coffin. It was all too much. So, I walked away.

“You know,” she went on. “He never left a note. Not a word or a hint. My parents never stopped beating themselves up over it.” She turned to look at me and, for a moment, I wondered if the real reason she was here was to seek answers from me. I had none to give her.

“We weren't really friends after we went to secondary school,” I said, feeling an abrupt rush of guilt. For years there was no need to recall.

“What happened?”

I shrugged. “We were in different classes and drifted apart.” I avoided her gaze and spun the empty beer can on the floor, listening to the thin aluminium clinking against it. I recalled how Jun Ming had tried to talk to me several times in the weeks before he took his life, but I'd ignored him. By then, he was an outcast in school, and to be associated with him would mean to share the brunt of bullying.

“What about you?” I asked.

“What about me?”

I considered the most tactful way to phrase it. “Why are you alone with Ian?”

She grew quiet and stared into the distance. I waited.

“My husband's in prison.”

“Oh.” I tried to even my tone. “What happened?”

“Wrong place, wrong time.” She lifted her can to her lips. “He didn’t mean to injure the other guy. He was just trying to protect himself. But like all mistakes, once you make the first one, it’s hard to stop.”

Even in the dimness of the night, I could see the fine lines on Huiling’s forehead and along her eyes. I watched her take another sip of her beer and noticed, for the first time, that her arms were incredibly thin. Greenish veins traced her wrist to her fingers, their knuckles sticking out like tiny pebbles. I thought about her unemployment, her two bulging knapsacks, Ian’s battered shoes, and knew there was no way she was renovating her home.

“If you need to,” I said. “You can stay here a little longer.”

I felt her body tense. Maybe she realised I’d figured out her lie. I wasn’t judging her. My own life was a mess.

“Won’t Claire and Duncan be back soon?”

“Yes,” I said, even though I didn’t feel so confident. Claire had left for almost two months now, and the longer she stayed away, the harder it was to envision her return. I had not spoken to her since she left, afraid of what the conversation would bring. “You can stay until they return. I know renovations can drag sometimes.”

She gave a small smile. “That’s true.”

“And even if you can’t stay here, I’m sure you can find someplace else. Your parents’ place, perhaps?” Huiling’s mom was always warm and friendly whenever I dropped by their house, offering packets of Ribena and jars of homemade butter cookies.

“They passed away a few years ago.”

“Oh.”

For the first time, I understood why, of all people, she had looked me up. Perhaps she was really alone in this. Like all of us.

“It’s okay,” she said, straightening her legs and looking up at the starless sky. “They are

in heaven with Jun Ming now. I'm sure they are all happy up there. No more worries. No more obligations."

I followed her gaze and imagined Jun Ming looking down at us from heaven. I didn't believe in God, but neither did I believe that our souls, filled with a lifetime of our thoughts and feelings and love and memories, simply vanished upon death. But where do they go? And if Jun Ming could see us now, would he be surprised? Would he feel comforted by our reunion? Or would he resent it? A breeze passed and I shivered, feeling cold all of a sudden.

Huiling drained the last of her beer and stood up. I collected the empty cans and headed to the kitchen.

As I tossed the cans into the bin, I saw her slip into Duncan's room and heard the door close with a gentle click.

I lay in bed, unable to sleep that night. Flashbacks of Jun Ming flooded my mind. The only pictures I had of him were formal shots taken for our primary six class graduation, but even those I'd thrown away several years ago when I married and moved out of my parents' home. Yet, as I thought about him, his face appeared clear and stark, as if he'd never left my consciousness.

Jun Ming was my desk partner and best friend in primary school, and I'd rejoiced when our PSLE scores qualified us for the same secondary school. But a few weeks into the new semester, he was singled out by the other boys for his high-nasal voice and effeminate behaviour. They called him *gu-niang* and *ah-kua*, and exaggerated his gait by swaying their hips back and forth. Growing up together, I never noticed those traits, and in hindsight, wondered if those depictions were even accurate or fair. But once I saw him in that light, I couldn't unsee it. I stopped speaking to him, ignored his phone calls, and was more than happy when we split into different classes in secondary two. Jun Ming mostly kept to himself and often disappeared after school. I'd have assumed our friendship was over if not for the few times Jun Ming tried to talk

to me in his last weeks. What did he want to tell me? Did a secret torment him? Were the boys in school right? Was he gay?

I did not know. All I knew was on that final morning, at approximately four am, Jun Ming turned the lock in his bedroom door and, donning a black T-shirt and navy-blue shorts with nothing in his hands or pockets, leapt from his window on the tenth storey. His parents and Huiling were asleep and did not hear the sound of body hitting concrete. A forty-year-old delivery man would discover his body half an hour later and call the police. And it was only later, when his mother woke up at six-thirty and looked out of her kitchen window that she noticed a couple of police officers gathered at the bottom of her flat. Still, she would go to Jun Ming's room to wake him up for school and realise she could not open the door. Even then, she did not put two and two together until the police officers rang her doorbell twenty minutes later. All this was reported in the newspapers and tabloids. For days after, neighbours would talk about the scream that shook them up from their slumber. The piercing, desperate cries that travelled along the common corridor as the police escorted Jun Ming's mother from her flat, and how they would never forget the funeral wake that took place at their void deck. The boy had been so young, so promising, they would say, and for a brief period in my adolescence, I slept with a nightlight and refused to play any Nintendo games. I never told anyone about this. Not even Claire.

"Any luck with your job search?" I asked Huiling. It was the weekend and we had just finished breakfast.

"Yes, actually," she said, wiping the dinner table with a rag. She smiled. "I'll be starting work at an events company on Monday."

"Congrats! As a receptionist?"

"As an administrative assistant. It's just a contract job for a year, but I'll take what I can get."

“No, it sounds great,” I said, feeling genuine happiness for her. “In fact, let’s go celebrate.”

“Where to?” she asked, perking up. Even Ian, who’d only spoken a handful of sentences to me since we met, looked up from his picture book.

“How about the Botanic Gardens?” Duncan loved the huge playground over there. “It’s just fifteen minutes away. I can drive us. And we can have lunch together after.”

“Sounds perfect!” She clasped Ian’s hand and was about to get ready when she paused. “Thanks, Shaun. Really.”

And once again, I saw a filament of Jun Ming light up in her wide-set eyes, and I had to look away.

It was almost noon when we arrived at the Botanic Gardens. The sun was so hot it burnt the sand under our sandals, and we had to squint our eyes as we walked. Despite the heat, tons of children were chasing each other, building sandcastles, and tunnelling down the slides. We found an empty bench and sat down while Ian ran to the playground.

“I haven’t seen him this happy,” I said, watching Ian climb up a ladder.

“What do you mean?”

Ian had just reached the top of the slide when an older boy came up from behind and gave him a rough push. I frowned, wondering if I should intervene. But Ian stepped back, and the older kid went down first. “He just seems pretty reserved,” I said finally.

Huiling shrugged. “He doesn’t have many friends, not even in school.” Then she gave a tight laugh. “It’s mostly just him and me, you know?”

I nodded. “He must miss his father.” As soon as the words left my mouth, a familiar ache bloomed in my chest. I wondered if Duncan missed me. How was he coping with the separation? Was he upset? Was he used to living with his grandparents? I feared he thought I’d abandoned him and hoped Claire had been fair in her explanation about us. I used to visit his

kindergarten to peek at him through the windows, but even those visits had stopped. I was afraid Claire would find out about them, complicating matters further. I looked up and caught Huiling giving me a quizzical look.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I realised my eyes stung a little. I rubbed them and feigned a yawn. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just tired. Probably from all the overtime this week.” I stood up and stretched. “I’m going to the restroom. Do you need anything?”

She shook her head, focusing her attention back on Ian. “No, thanks. You go ahead.”

I took a short walk to clear my head before using the restroom. Lunchtime was approaching and I knew of a popular cafe nearby that sold decent burgers and fries. For the first time in months, I felt excited to be out and about.

Maybe it’s a good thing that Huiling looked me up after all, I thought. I wasn’t attracted to her or anything. Rather, in as much as I was helping her with lodging, she, too, was helping me. We afforded each other a friendship, a comfort of sorts, to tide us through this juncture in our lives. In that sense, I was grateful for her presence.

The industrial-themed hipster cafe was small and cosy, with fairy lights hanging from its low ceiling. Ian scowled as Huiling and I gave our orders to the waiter. He was upset with her for tearing him from the playground. He grabbed a fork on the table and started twirling it.

“Stop that,” Huiling said, but he continued playing with the fork, scraping it back and forth on the table loudly.

“I said *stop that*, Ian.” Just as she was about to snatch the fork from him, our food arrived. Ian folded his arms and refused to eat. By then, even I was starting to feel frustrated with him.

“Fine,” Huiling said, cutting her burger. “Don’t eat then, but don’t complain about being hungry later.”

Ian's eyes started to tear. I offered him a paper napkin.

"Leave him alone," Huiling said angrily. Ian continued to cry.

Huiling slammed her fork and knife down with a clang. "What's the matter with you? Why are you being so difficult today?" She tried to get him to face her, but he resisted and pulled away. "Look, Uncle Shaun is nice enough to bring us out and this is how you behave? By showing him your black face?" She was shouting now, and silent tears streamed down his cheeks.

People from other tables were starting to stare. I whispered to Huiling to calm down, and she spun around, her eyes flashing.

"Like you know any better."

I blinked, feeling the sting of her words. Before I could respond, Ian stood up suddenly. With his eyes closed, he started shrieking and jabbed his thigh with the fork repeatedly.

"IAN!" Huiling yelled. She grabbed his arm and tried to remove the fork from his hand, but his grip was too strong. I bolted from my seat and held back his arm while Huiling pried the fork from his fingers. His thighs were scratched raw. Still, he wouldn't stop hitting himself with his bare hands. Not when the cafe manager approached our table. Not when Huiling and I dragged his quivering body out of the restaurant. Not even when Huiling hugged him close and wept.

The ride home was quiet. Huiling had managed to calm Ian down by rocking him in her arms on the sidewalk for half an hour and whispering things I couldn't hear. I glanced at them from my rearview mirror. Ian appeared to be asleep, leaning on Huiling's arm while she held his hand. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

They spent the rest of the day in Duncan's bedroom. I left them alone and played some computer games. As evening drew closer, I went to the kitchen and made a simple pot of noodle soup with vegetables and eggs. The sky had deepened into an ombre blue by the time I

finished. I tapped on their door. "Dinner's ready," I said softly. All was quiet. I knocked again, louder this time, and cracked open the door.

The room was dark with only a whisper of light from the drawn curtains. There they lay, pressed against each other on Claire's single mattress, still in the clothes they'd worn in the afternoon, the both of them fast asleep.

That night I drifted in and out of slumber, my mind submerged in a semi-conscious state. I was thirteen again, playing Nintendo at my classmate's house. I'd been invited to play by the popular boys in my new class and didn't want to miss an opportunity to make friends.

We were in the middle of Super Mario when one of them suddenly asked, "So, is it true what they say about Jun Ming?"

"What thing?" I said, my fingers stabbing the game console, eyes trained on collecting all the coins in my path.

"You know what we're talking about. You're his good friend, right?" another said.

"No, not really." My fingers fumbled and I missed a coin.

"Why are you evading the question? Are you trying to protect him? Oh.... I know. You're *like* him, is it?" another said, his voice almost a sneer.

I stopped playing and glanced at the group of them, their eyes trained on me like vultures, and I finally understood why I was invited to the house. My heart beat hard in my chest. These boys were popular and influential. My fate in my new secondary school hinged upon my answer. I had to make a choice.

And in my dream, unlike what happened those many years ago, I was not scared. I made the right choice. I defended my friend.

I overslept and woke up the next morning with a headache. The house had a strange, deep silence to it. I shuffled into the living room and noticed that Duncan's door was open.

Peering in, I saw that the bedroom was all tidied up. The bed sheets were straightened, the blankets folded, and Huling's two backpacks were gone. It was as if no one had lived there the past week. I found a note on Duncan's desk:

We've found another place to stay. Thank you, for everything.

P/S: Sorry for not waiting for you to wake up. We are bad with goodbyes.

I dropped the note on the desk and stared at the empty room, much like how it looked the morning Claire took off with Duncan, and a rush of grief filled my lungs. My eyes fell on Huling's note again, but this time, it was Duncan's face that flashed in my mind.

From the window, an exhaust blasted from a motorbike. I stumbled back to the living room, my head still throbbing, and picked up the phone before I lost my courage.

"Hello?" Claire's voice came on.

I opened my mouth to speak and felt the familiar swell in my throat. It's me, Shaun, I wanted to say. I am ready. I am finally ready to talk.

END

Word Count: 4,596 words